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SUBJECT: "NO CNN CAMERA CREWS!" -- CHILD PRISONERS IN THE  
PHILIPPINES

REF: 05 MANILA 2555

11. (U) This message is Sensitive but Unclassified -- Please  
handle accordingly.

12. (U) Summary: A recent visit by emboffs to a jail in a  
town near Manila highlighted in a microcosm the problem of  
incarcerated children in the Philippines. On the national  
level, the GRP is trying to address the situation and Mission  
is examining ways to help. CNN recently aired a candid  
report on the plight of these children, which may prod the  
GRP to further action. The problem faced by child inmates is  
serious, with NGOs believing that children housed in adult  
jails are highly vulnerable to sexual abuse, recruitment into  
gangs and forced labor. End Summary.

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Visit to Prison near Manila  
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13. (U) On February 22, poloff and pol LES visited a  
municipal jail in Dasmarinas, Cavite, located roughly an  
hour's drive south of Metro Manila. The jail houses over 350  
inmates, most of them adult males. At the time of the visit,  
the jail held 16 male juveniles. Jail officials claimed the  
juveniles ranged in age from 14-17 (though emboffs suspected  
that at least one was much younger). The 16 were held in the  
same cramped cell with one toilet and no beds. There were  
two large wooden shelves for all to sleep on. A few books  
and an ancient television provided the only relief from  
boredom. The juvenile inmates were let out of their cell  
once a week for an hour of basketball, plus once or twice a  
day for religious and primary education classes. Many have  
languished in the jail for months. While not housed in the  
same cells as adults, the jail is very small and the 300-plus  
adult males are only yards away from the children.

14. (SBU) Jail officials contended that the main problem  
regarding juvenile prisoners was a lack of resources, coupled  
with a lack of focus on the issue by some in the national,  
regional and local levels of government. During poloff's  
separate meetings with both the governor and vice-governor of  
Cavite Province, it was clear that the issue was simply not  
on their radar screens. The vice-governor candidly admitted  
that a multitude of problems (such as infrastructure,  
education and economic concerns) result in the neglect of  
this issue. The governor himself was only vaguely aware of  
NGO plans to build rehabilitation homes for male juvenile  
offenders in his province.

15. (SBU) Fortunately for the 16 children housed in the

Dasmariñas jail, help will arrive soon. Polloff and pol LES toured a comfortable, soon-to-be-opened home for them (located next-to, but outside the prison walls) that was paid for with local government funds. During a meeting with polloff, the town mayor said that he could not rely on provincial or national government funding to solve the problem, and thus found the resources for the new facility within his own budget. He noted, however, that his actions were not the norm and asserted that most local governments continued "to ignore" the problem.

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Trying to Grapple with Situation  
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¶16. (U) Regarding the national situation of child prisoners writ large, the GRP says it is trying to deal with the situation by separating all children from the general adult population. It admits, however, that it cannot afford to house all children in separate facilities as of this time. As reviewed in reftel, NGOs are trying to assist where they can by helping construct separate facilities.

¶17. (U) With the help of the USG, some legislative action to deal with the child prisoners' issue has been taken. In January 1999, The Children's Legal Bureau -- an NGO funded by USAID -- prepared a draft bill on juvenile justice reform and launched a lobbying campaign to push for passage. In December 2004 -- five years after its introduction -- the Senate finally passed its version of the bill, followed by the House in February 2005. The bills are expected to be reconciled soon, then sent to the President. The objective of the legislation is to: prevent the detention of children in adult jails; raise the age of criminal responsibility from

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9 to 12 (House version) or 15 (Senate version), and; provide for the referral of juvenile offenders to preventative as well as rehabilitative programs. Through the USAID-funded Legal Accountability and Dispute Resolution Project (LADR), the Juvenile Justice Group (a coalition composed of NGOs, the Philippine Department of Social Welfare and Development and other concerned organizations) the Mission stands ready to assist with implementation of the bill once it is signed into law. USAID is also helping fund The Asia Foundation's Jail Decongestion project. This project is not focused on children per se, but it is hoped that decongestion can assist the prison and jail system deal more adequately with all inmates of any age.

¶18. (U) The Mission's law enforcement agencies (embodied by the Law Enforcement Working Group, or, "LEWG") is also focusing on additional steps in this area. The LEWG is currently planning to meet with top Philippine officials responsible for juvenile justice, including the head of the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), the Secretary of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and officials from the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG). One key focus of these discussions will be the problem of child prisoners. Further, Mission will be holding a jails/prisons best practices seminar in April 2006 that will deal with a wide range of issues, including juvenile prisoners.

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CNN gets attention  
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¶19. (U) In a report prepared by ITV, CNN International ran a second installment on child prisoners in the Philippines on February 1. In their first report aired six months ago, the news crew visited several Metro Manila jails posing as relief workers, all the while filming the conditions with a hidden camera. The piece proved embarrassing to the government and President Arroyo publicly stated that steps would be taken to solve the problem. Months later the crew returned to the

same jails and their graphic footage showed no substantial improvements. Government officials were embarrassed by the glaring media spotlight. Indeed, before the visit to the Dasmarinas jail, poloff received three separate telephone calls from the warden, seeking repeated reassurances that "no CNN camera crews" would accompany her on the tour. Observers have told us that the airing of the embarrassing CNN reports will act to prod the GRP to focus on making progress on this matter.

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Comment  
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¶10. (SBU) As demonstrated by the situation in Dasmarinas, the problem faced by child inmates is serious. The exact scope of the problem is not clear, but probably thousands of children are impacted nationally. NGOs believe that children housed in adult jails are highly vulnerable to sexual abuse, recruitment into gangs and forced labor. In light of the bad publicity flowing out of the CNN reporting, the GRP appears to have this matter on its mind and Mission will continue to work with it on ways to help alleviate the problem.

Jones